

The Geography of Zane Grey's *Western Union*

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The geography of Zane Grey's *Western Union* is one of the more straightforward among his oeuvre, with great faithfulness to place names, distances, directions, and landmarks. That is not to say, however, that this geography is without compelling intrigue. Indeed, through this western romance set along the telegraph route in the summer and fall of 1861, the reader also learns much about the Oregon Trail and the cultural and natural landscape of the Great Plains of western Nebraska and eastern Wyoming. Westbound travelers today following Interstate 80 and U.S. 26 can savor many of the same sights that Grey describes with his characteristic verve and accuracy.

Wayne Cameron of Boston is the protagonist of this tale, and, in an unusual narrative device for Grey, Cameron tells his story in the first

person. Though Cameron is a western neophyte, he has the good fortune to fall in with two salt-of-the-earth cowboys, Jack Lowden and Vance Shaw. Late of Texas, Shaw proves to be the type of gunslinger that Grey made famous: honorable, quick as a snake on the draw, and with just enough of a mean streak to leave the bad guys shaking in their boots. Both Shaw and Cameron develop romantic interests: Shaw with Ruby, a teen prostitute with a heart of gold who had been wrongfully forced into the trade, and Cameron with Kit Sunderlund, the proud daughter of a Texas cattleman (Figure 1).

Immediately upon Cameron's departure from Omaha by stage to join the telegraph construction in Chapter One, two things should be clear to the reader. First, Grey's geography is sound. The Platte River is on the left side of the stage, just as it should be, as they pass through Grand Island and by Fort Kearney on the way to Gothenburg, Nebraska. Grey proves his gift of keen observation immediately as he gives life to the Platte, an iconic braided stream of the plains: "The channel was wide and was composed of two swift muddy streams separated by sand bars and flats. The low banks were lined with willows and cottonwoods just beginning to be clothed with bright green." (Figure 2).

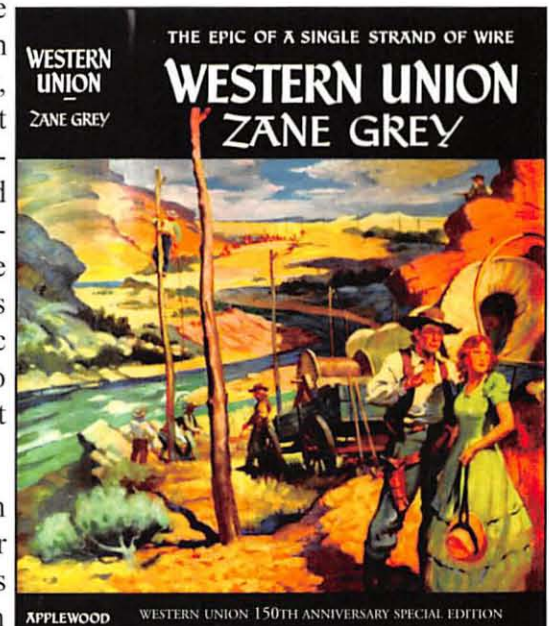


Figure 1. *Western Union* dustjacket, Applewood reprint, 2001.



Figure 2. The braided streams of the Platte River near Kearney, Nebraska. Photo by the author.

Second, though the book's spatial setting is primarily from Gothenburg to Fort Bridger, Wyoming, this terrain inspires the same grand sense of the West as in some of Grey's better-known works, set in the Colorado Plateau of southern Utah and northern Arizona. Typical of Grey's easterners who first venture west, in Chapter One the plains landscape features only "gray monotony." After closer contact and more time on the land, Cameron in Chapter Five finds the bark of coyotes to be "thrilling" and illustrative of the "wildness of the prairie." Next, there is a "resplendent sunrise," and away from the Platte River, the prairie is "somehow beautiful in

spite of the monotony of the rolling barren reaches." As is typical for most western landscapes, travel through

the plains is challenging, as Grey astutely writes in Chapter Six: “This prairie that looked level and unobstructed to a casual glance was a deceit and a snare.” Grey’s characters find the plains riddled with deep dry washes and harrowing stream crossings.

The natural landscape transforms Cameron from a tenderfoot to an increasingly significant person in the telegraph construction effort. In Chapter Six, Cameron marvels at the change he sees in himself: “all of my emotions had been tremendously sharpened and augmented by this first contact with the West.” He “did not want the West, with all its beauty, its wildness, its increasing grandeur, with its catastrophes, with all that could come along in duty to an extraordinary enterprise, to kill that in me which had made me so eager and happy to throw in my lot with it.” By this point, Cameron is at one with the West and will do anything to live up to the expectations of his comrades and the job.

The cultural landscape is also prominent in the first half of the book. Gothenburg, at that time the western terminus of the telegraph line, plays a central role as the meeting place for the book’s main characters. It is a “purty hot place” in Chapter One, with shacks, tents, high board fronts, and Red Pierce’s “gamblin’ hell.” Just before reaching Gothenburg, Cameron marvels at the speed and horsemanship of an eastbound Pony Express rider. The completion of the telegraph route in 1861 rendered the short-lived Pony Express obsolete, but Grey pays homage to this mail service near Gothenburg, which to this day is famous for its Pony Express station.

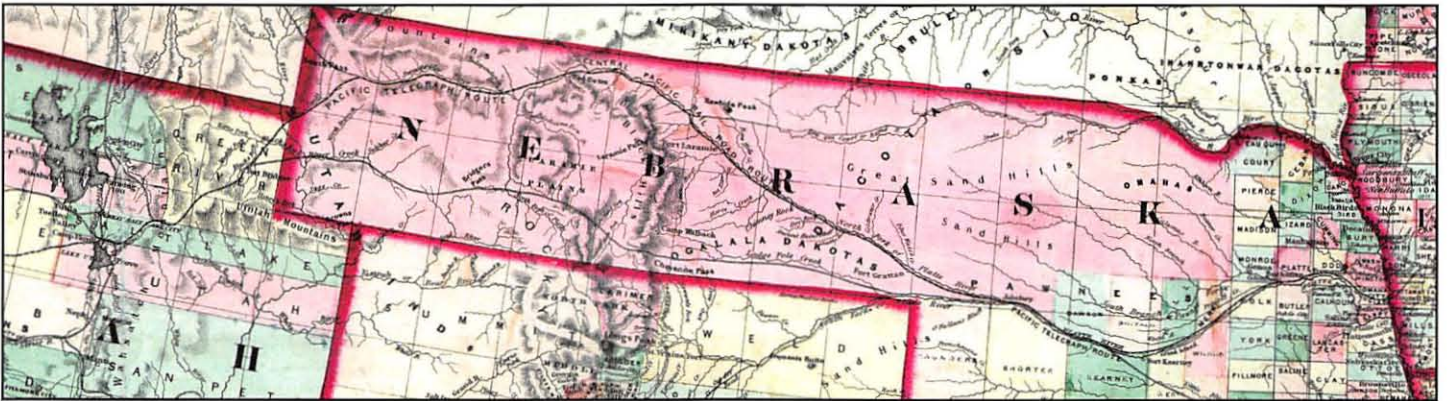


Figure 3. Map of eastern section of the route of the Pacific Telegraph (or Western Union) 1862.

The westward construction of the transcontinental telegraph approximately paralleled the Oregon Trail (Figure 3). Though Grey never authored a western romance novel that focused exclusively on the Oregon Trail, *Western Union* provides a plethora of insights into the life and landscape of the trail. Grey accomplishes this with a plot device of cattle moving westward along the trail to central Wyoming, concurrent with the construction of the telegraph line. Thus, the geography of *Western Union* is nearly as much the geography of the Oregon Trail as it is of the route of the Pacific Telegraph Company (the official name of the construction company formed by the president of the Western Union Telegraph Company).

The characters of *Western Union* regularly overcome challenges typical to the Oregon Trail route, such as a memorable prairie fire scene halfway between Ogallala, Nebraska, and Julesburg, Colorado. The shallow, braided stream of the South Platte River offers life-saving refuge from the “monstrous wall of flame” in Chapter Seven (Figure 4). Next, in Chapter Eight, Cameron is “completely disillusioned” by Julesburg and its “row of five unsightly buildings, crude, drab, rugged with their high board fronts facing the west apprehensively.” Here some patrolling dragoons from Fort Laramie, Wyoming join the telegraph laborers to repel an attack by Ute and Arapaho forces.

Farther northwest along the route in Nebraska, about the place they survive an electric storm and buffalo stampede, the telegraph workers encounter Chimney Rock. It is “one of the most eagerly sought landmarks on the Oregon Trail” due not only to its striking form after the flat land farther east, but also because it marked the completion of about one-third of the total mileage faced by Oregon Trail emigrants traveling from Missouri to Oregon. Clearly, this place manifestly impressed Grey. In chapters ten and eleven (Continued on Page 36)

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he devotes some of his most passionate description in the entire book to what is today designated a National Historic Site:

It was a dim, spectral, chimney-shaped shaft of rock, rising above the haze of the horizon to pierce the sky. It had no color unless it was a ghostly dim gray. After the endless days of the monotonous sweeping prairie it seemed a thing of beauty, unreliable, a mirage from the highlands . . . After so many weeks, seemingly years, of flat barren prairie, there was something soul-freeing in the sight of this landmark. The next morning before sunrise, in the transparent atmosphere of dawn, I saw it look like a great white sentinel beckoning the travelers to its shelter and to the pure water that it marked . . . There was a volcanic-like cone of bare gray stone slanting to a sharp apex from which towered a high shaft of rock that gave the landmark its name . . . it meant an end of the ghastly barrens and the beginning of the long rolling steppes of rough country that led up to the Rockies.

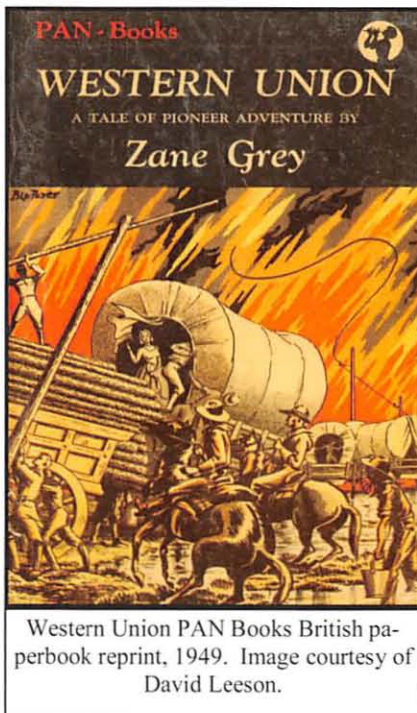
Though Chimney Rock looked “volcanic-like” to Grey, no igneous activity led to the formation of the famous spire. Over the eons, stream erosion isolated a nearly vertical mound capped with resistant rock (Arikaree sandstone). Wind and precipitation eroded the sides of the mound, especially at the base of soft Brule clay. As the clay washed away, the resistant rock was further exposed and undercut until it fell away in giant blocks that lay like armor on the sloping base. Curiously, Grey does not mention several other famous Oregon Trail landmarks in this region, including Courthouse Rock, Jail Rock, Scotts Bluff, and Register Cliff.

The trials and tribulations continue for the weary workers when in Chapter Eleven they reach the Laramie River in Wyoming and face a perilous crossing. Fort Laramie, in Chapter Twelve, is the “largest and most famous fort on the frontier” that occupies “a commanding and picturesque site” where green hills meet the river “in marked and beautiful contrast to the monotonous prairie.” West of Fort Laramie, Grey’s ambivalence for the plains turns to sylvan scenes of colorful landscapes: “lofty purple hills” (likely the Laramie Range), “rugged gray bluffs,” and “shining streams flowing between banks with golden and green cottonwoods.” One of these shining streams in Chapter Twelve carries one of the most alluring names in the West: the Sweetwater River that Grey describes as a “clear, amber stream.” The days along the Sweetwater are the best of the trip in Cameron’s eyes.

Once the workers and migrants reached the Sweetwater, they came to Independence Rock, “the most famous of the landmarks on the Oregon Trail. It was a gray granite pile looking as if it were a mosaic of separate rocks irregularly joined together.” In this case, Grey is correct on both the granitic composition of the landmark and its fame, which comes from being the place mentioned most frequently in traveler accounts from the trail. Independence Rock (now a state historic site) is the top of a buried mountain. As erosion removed the overlying soil, pressure on the rock was relieved. The rock expanded outward along curved fractures in a process called exfoliation, shedding large slabs of granite and giving the rock its tortoise shell appearance. Wind-blown sand and silt polished the surface of the rock in a process called wind faceting. From the top of Independence Rock, Cameron sees to the west-northwest the snow-capped Wind River Mountains, the “finest range in the West.”

Toward the end of their journey, the telegraph workers approach the relatively gentle crossing of the Continental Divide at South Pass and the nearby gold diggings of Atlantic City. Though the first discoveries of gold there pre-date the temporal setting of *Western Union* (1861), Grey is a tad premature in describing the town, since it did not reach the level of development he describes until later in the decade. Nevertheless, in Chapter Thirteen, Grey provides a memorable description of a mining town on the frontier:

I faced a deep, wide gulch down the side of which the trail wound, crossing a roaring stream, and zigzagged steeply up the other side. Here and there were patches of fir trees. Halfway down the slope began a cluster of innumerable, queer, unsightly, patchwork shacks, with tents interspersed between them. They led the eye down and down to bigger huts and finally large, crude, board buildings, all facing down hill. Parallel with the



rushing white torrent and the trees which lined it ran an enormous ditch extending all the way up the gulch to the base of the mountain, and in this ditch and on its banks and everywhere around were active moving men, so many and so colorful in their red shirts, and so apparently frenzied that they resembled an army of ants.

Following the requisite happy resolution of the love interests and the triumph of good over evil, the telegraph building carries on through a blizzard at South Pass, crosses the Green River, and meets the Mormon crews working their way east at Fort Bridger (now a state historic site). His readers can only imagine what fine descriptions Grey would have penned of the western half of the Oregon Trail, yet *Western Union* provides a grand and almost entirely accurate geographical overview of the telegraph route and the challenges of Great Plains travel along the Oregon Trail in 1861.



(A HEAP OF . . .Cont'd from Page 29)

Endowment fund: In addition to strong general accounts, the Society's endowment fund, begun in 2007, topped \$100,000 in 2012, placing us in the best financial position of our 31-year history. Presciently advocated by the late **Phil Lawrence** (1923-2012), the endowment fund will allow us to continue our long-term funding of worthy sites and projects without invading our capital.

Publishing: In 2012, we published the *Centennial Edition* of *Riders of the Purple Sage*. We have already sold 204 of the 300 copies we printed, and are now opening sales to non-members of the Society.

Library of Congress honors: We recently learned that Zane Grey's original *Riders of the Purple Sage* has been included in the list of "Books That Shaped America"—100 books deemed by the Library of Congress to be the most influential in American literature. This designation places Grey on the same list as Alcott, Capote, Dickinson, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Frost, Hemingway, Hawthorne, Lee, Rand, Steinbeck, Thoreau, Twain, Williams, and other "classic" authors.

NOTE: We can't help wondering what Grey's critics would say NOW if they were here to see his work included on the same list of "great works" as *Huckleberry Finn*, *Gone with the Wind*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Moby Dick*, *Grapes of Wrath* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*! The incurably curious will find the complete list of "Books That Shaped America" at the Library of Congress website: <http://www.loc.gov/bookfest/books-that-shaped-america/>.

Juvenile versions and other publications: To follow up the success of its *Centennial Edition* of *Riders*, the Society is already planning a *Centennial Edition* of *The Rainbow Trail*, for publication in 2015. To extend our critical outreach to young readers, we are also working on republishing other Grey books for young readers, including *The Young Forester*, *The Young Pitcher* and *The Young Lion Hunter*, and possibly others. In addition, Society member and current vice president, **Dr. Rosanne Vrugtman**, has just completed the editing of a juvenile edition of *Betty Zane*; and is now working on the other two books in Zane Grey's *Frontier Trilogy* (AKA *Ohio River Trilogy*). Other ZGWS publications are in varying stages of conception and preparation at this writing.

E/E Plan: In 2012, long-time Society members **Zen Ervin** and **Bob Earp** completed the "E/E Plan," which